

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 4NEW YORK TIMES
3 October 1986

White House And Its News

Disclosures on Libya Raise Credibility Issue

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 2 — In considering "disinformation" as a means to undermine the Libyan leader, the Reagan Administration has not only risked damage to its credibility but also cast doubt over its overall news policy.

News Analysis On the one hand, the Administration has encouraged selective leaks of intelligence information, some of it of questionable accuracy. But it has coupled this with a concerted effort to punish journalists and newspapers that seek to publish accurate information, if the Administration finds the disclosure sensitive or potentially embarrassing.

This two-pronged approach to the news was underscored today as the Administration virtually conceded that it was practicing "disinformation" in seeking to topple the Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

At the same time, it was disclosed that a newly formed team of Federal Bureau of Investigation agents was looking into about a dozen cases of disclosures of sensitive information to news organizations. This investigation came after aggressive moves by the Administration to dismiss officials accused of having made sensitive material available to reporters, as well as efforts to put pressure on major newspapers to withhold or alter possibly

sensitive articles and generally to control access within the White House and elsewhere to information and officials.

These developments underscored a general pattern that has emerged in the last six years in which President Reagan and his staff have substantially altered — and successfully limited — the kind of information the public receives about the Government.

The revelation that some of the information provided to the press about Libya may have been purposefully flawed underscores the pitfalls of a policy whose hallmark is control, with few news conferences and public appearances by Mr. Reagan, limited opportunities to question the President and what the White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, says is a corporate-style approach to the news.

'Most Favorable Light'

"Any organization, Government or corporate, tries to present its message in the most favorable light," Mr. Speakes said. "That doesn't mean managing the news. Look at those libel suits against Time magazine and CBS. There were an awful lot of 'no comments' by them, which we would get criticized for."

"This Administration, no more than any other, has tried to present its message in the most effective way, and that doesn't mean lying or misrepresenting the facts. We don't do that."

Senior White House aides say privately that the details of a memorandum about Libya, which appeared today in The Washington Post, was both embarrassing and potentially damaging, especially abroad.

The memorandum, by Vice. Adm. John M. Poindexter, the White House national security adviser, reportedly urged a campaign against Colonel Qaddafi involving "real and illusory events — through a disinformation program" intended to undermine and eventually to topple the Libyan leader.

'All Right With Us'

"We think for domestic consumption there will be no problems," a White House official said. "It's Qaddafi. After all, whatever it takes to get rid of him is all right with us — that's the feeling, we think, in the country. On the foreign scene it will cause problems, though. We're constantly talking about the Soviets' doing disinformation. It's going to cause difficulties for us. We don't think it's a major, lasting firestorm, but there will be some ripples."

Publicly, White House officials sought to play down the notion that the United States was engaged in deceiving American news organizations in an effort to unsettle Colonel Qaddafi. Mr. Speakes, during nearly three hours of briefings on the issue today, repeated two points on many occasions.

The first point was that "Poindexter says there was no attempt to provide disinformation to the U.S. media."

The second concerned a lengthy article in The Wall Street Journal on Aug. 25 that said the United States and Libya were on a "collision course." This was an article that The Post's report today implies was a direct product of a disinformation campaign and the article that led to other newspaper and television reports about possible Libyan plans for new terrorist activity.

Disclosures 'Not Authorized'

Mr. Speakes denied that The Journal was the target of disinformation about Libya. "Poindexter said this morning to me that the disclosures to The Wall Street Journal were not authorized by the U.S. Government, but were generally correct," Mr. Speakes said.

He also declined to confirm or deny that foreign news organizations were involved in a disinformation campaign.

Beyond this, Government officials agreed today that the Reagan Administration's information policies were highly selective and marked by broad contradictions. On the one hand, the Administration, which publicly denounces and threatens Government officials for giving secret information to reporters, has disclosed — perhaps more than any other Administration in recent years — highly sensitive information for the sake of policy and politics.

The Administration made public reconnaissance photographs in 1982 that intelligence officials said proved Nicaragua, with Cuban and Soviet assistance, was assembling the largest military force in Central America and helping guerrillas in El Salvador.

In 1983, after the Soviet Union shot down a South Korean airliner, killing 269 people abroad, the United States revealed that American listening posts had intercepted radio conversations between the Soviet fighter pilot and his controllers, a disclosure that may have told Moscow that the United States could intercept important Soviet military communications.

Libyan Interceptions Revealed

Earlier this year, Mr. Reagan publicly spoke of the Administration's knowledge of messages sent between Tripoli, the Libyan capital, and its diplomatic posts — messages, the President said, that proved Libyan involvement in the terrorist attack April 5 against a discotheque in West Berlin, in which two people were killed and 230 others wounded.

Some intelligence officials said they thought the disclosure would allow the Libyans to thwart similar interception in the future.

"People have their own agenda," a ranking White House aide said. "There's always that way of getting that agenda to the press, no matter how sensitive."

In Washington, the official noted, The Washington Post and The New York Times are sometimes offered information by officials or groups seeking to express a point of view, and The Washington Times, which has a conservative editorial policy, is viewed as a vehicle for conservatives in the Administration.

'Sort of Entrapment'

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, a former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said: "Look, you do see more leaking of intelligence information now than at other times. But when someone leaks what they don't like, the Administration goes after them."

"By apparently using unwitting American journalists and newspapers," the Senator said, "the Administration is going against the rules." "If the journalist doesn't know it, the Administration is compounding the infraction. It's sort of entrapment."

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P More than any other Administration in recent times, the Reagan Administration has exerted its muscle, often successfully, against newspapers. After several weeks of negotiation with the White House last spring, The Washington Post published a story about Ronald W. Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency who was found guilty in June of selling sensitive intelligence secrets to the Soviet Union.

The Post published a story about Mr. Pelton, but without details that Administration officials argued would be potentially damaging. The article was published after threats that the newspaper would be prosecuted and after a phone call from President Reagan to Katharine M. Graham, the chief executive officer of the Post Company.

'The President's Position'

"On the basis of what I've observed over a series of Administrations, I don't think this one is all that different from the others," said Joseph Laitin, who served 17 years in key posts in the Defense and Treasury Departments and other agencies and who is now the ombudsman at The Washington Post. "People still leak to reporters, and what reporters tend to forget is that press secretaries are not there to give information. They're there to give the President's position, his point of view."

The view was echoed by Austin Ranney, a political scientist at the University of California in Berkeley and a former president of the American Political Science Association.

Mr. Ranney said: "Compared to the ineptness of the Carter Administration in dealing with the press, and the hostility of the Nixon and Johnson Administrations, the Reagan Administration has been remarkably shrewd and successful. The news media are not enemies to them. They've tried to use the media to promote their goals, to advance their own ends."

"Whether they've been able to use news policy in a less-defensible way than other Administrations, by leaking false information, for example, is another question," he said. "F.D.R. did it in World War II, and L.B.J. during Vietnam. But that was war. Of course it's different now: we're not in a war."